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UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY
EXECUTIVE WRITING COURSE

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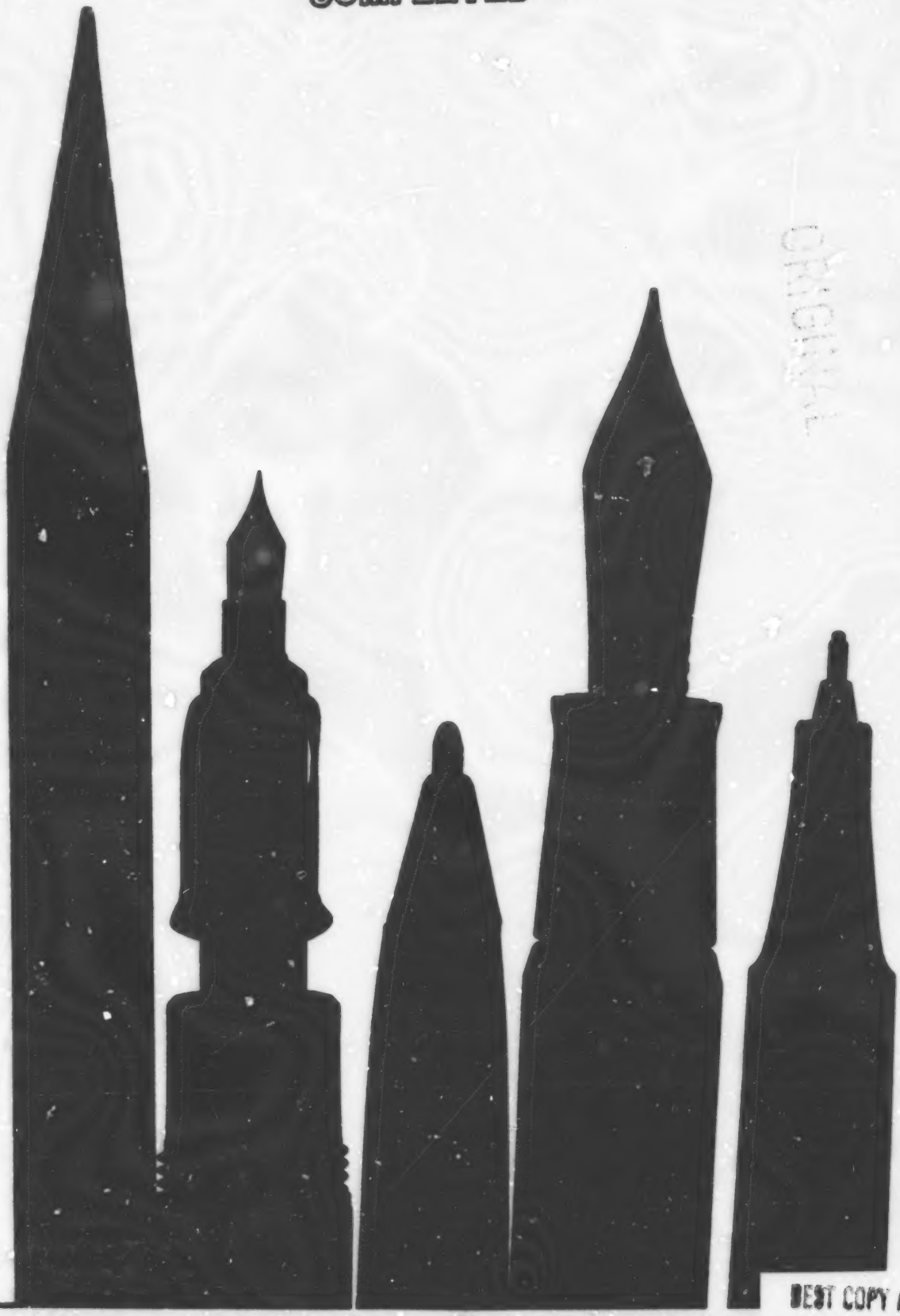

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Executive Writing, a half-day presentation, is available to Department of Defense units that provide audiences of at least 100 officers and civilian equivalents. For details, write or phone—

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ORGANIZED WRITING

Too many writers start throwing ink before they know what to aim at. When you write, start with a clear sense of your purpose and audience, and arrange your ideas so you get to the point fast. Then write effective paragraphs and sentences.

Establish Your Purpose and Audience

You'll save time and rewrite less if you plan before you pick up a pen or start to dictate. In the planning stage, analyze your audience in light of your purpose by answering these questions:

What is my purpose?

Who are my readers?

What are their interests?

How much do they know already?

What will make it easy for them to understand or act?

You'll discover ideas as you write, but you'll wander less by keeping the answers to these questions in mind.

Start Fast, Explain as Necessary, Then Stop

Timid writing creeps up on the most important information. First comes background, then discussion, and finally the so-what. With luck, the main point follows a sign such as therefore, consequently, or due to the above. This slow buildup isn't chaotic; it enacts the way writers inform themselves. But the pattern isn't efficient, either. From the perspective of readers, it's the clue-by-clue pattern of mystery stories.

Your writing should follow the newspaper pattern. Open with the most important information and taper off to the least important. Avoid mere chronology.

To find what to put first, think about the one sentence you'd keep if you could keep only one. Many letters and memos are simple enough to have such a key sentence, which should appear by the end of the first paragraph. The strongest letter highlights the main

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point in a one-sentence paragraph at the very beginning. Put requests before justifications, answers before explanations, conclusions before discussions, and summaries before details.

Sometimes, as in a complex proposal or a reply to various questions, you may have many key points. They would overload the first paragraph if you tried to put them all there. In these cases, start with a general statement of purpose.

Here are some good beginnings:

> We inspected the Directorate of Administration on 24 January 1984. Its overall performance was satisfactory. Special-interest areas were also satisfactory. . . .
>
> We request authorization to hire a full-time clerk typist or reassign one from the word-processing center. . . .
>
> This memorandum summarizes how we are planning the first step toward your goal of reorganizing the Air Force Reserve. . . .
>
> Sgt Frank Martin did a superb job during our recent engine change. . . .

Delay your main point to soften bad news or to introduce a controversial proposal. But don't delay routinely. Readers, like listeners, are put off by people who take forever to get to the point. In most cases, plunge right in.

To end most letters, just stop. When writing to persuade rather than just to inform, end strongly—with a forecast, appeal, or implication that activates the reader to do something. When feelings are involved, exit gracefully—with an expression of good will. When in doubt, offer your help or the name of a contact.

Use More Headings

Any document longer than three pages probably needs headings, so that readers can follow at a glance. Even a one-page letter can benefit from headings when topics vary widely. Be informative; avoid relying on headings that use one or two vague words.

For: Procedures

Try: How to Complete DoD Form 78

For: Use of Contractors

Try: How Much Contractors May Charge

Write Effective Paragraphs

Keep paragraphs short. Cover one topic completely before starting another, and let a topic run for several paragraphs if necessary. But keep each paragraph down to roughly four or five sentences. Long paragraphs will divide where your thinking takes a turn.

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Now and then use a one-sentence paragraph to highlight an important idea, such as the main point of a letter.

Use more lists. Look for opportunities to divide paragraphs into lists. This technique is especially important for staff papers and directives. As you can see, lists—

Add white space for easy reading,

Show levels of importance,

Simplify—

Initial review,

Later revision.

Just remember to avoid dividing a paragraph into more than the three levels shown here. If you use too many lists within lists, readers will lose sight of the overall structure.

Take advantage of topic sentences. A paragraph may need a topic sentence—a generalization explained by the rest of the paragraph. Then again, it may not. The decision to use a topic sentence is among a writer's many judgment calls. A short paragraph announcing the time, place, and agenda of a meeting might begin with, "Here are details about the meeting." Yet such a topic sentence is probably unnecessary, for readers can follow the writer's thinking without it.

But suppose you're writing a report on ways to protect a particular military facility from attack. Your ideas are complex, and the evidence needed to make them clear and convincing is considerable. So your paragraphs are likely to run longer and use more topic sentences than is the case in letters. Here's a model:

> Because so much of the complex borders the river, its waterfront is especially vulnerable to attack. The naval station and the shipyard next to it have 1.5 miles of waterfront on the river's north bank. Together they have 13 dry docks and piers. Two piers are used to load fuel. Most of the piers extend to within 100 yards of the center of the river's main ship channel, and the river itself is only 900 yards at its widest.

The first sentence of the sample gives the paragraph a bull's eye. Because we know early where the facts are headed, the paragraph inspires confidence. A lesser writer might have left out the topic sentence or put it elsewhere in the paragraph or claimed more than the facts support. Be alert to the advantages of topic sentences, for they help shape masses of information. Without them, some paragraphs make readers shrug and say, "So?"

Write Disciplined Sentences

So far we've talked about organizing letters and paragraphs so they call attention to important ideas. Now here are some important ways to avoid sentences that mumble: subordinate minor ideas, use more parallelism, place ideas deliberately, and try some mini-sentences.

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Subordinate minor ideas. Besides clarifying the relationship between ideas, subordination prevents overusing and—the weakest of all conjunctions.

For: The base exchange at Peterson AFB uses a similar contractor service and saves its customers about 15 percent.

Try: By using a similar contractor service, the base exchange at Peterson AFB saves its customers about 15 percent.

For: The revised travel-allowance tables have been mailed to all units and are effective 1 October.

Try: The revised travel-allowance tables, which have been mailed to all units, are effective 1 October. (stresses date)

Or: The revised travel-allowance tables, which are effective 1 October, have been mailed to all units. (stresses mailing)

Use more parallelism. Look for opportunities to arrange two or more equally important ideas so they look equal. Parallelism saves words, clarifies ideas, and provides balance. The first words of the series should use the same part of speech (verbs in the previous sentence).

For: The symposium is a forum for the dissemination of information and is not intended to establish standards.

Try: The symposium is a forum for sharing information, not for setting standards.

For: Effective 1 October, addressees will be required to utilize the cost accounts contained in the attachment. Addressees will cease reporting against cost accounts 1060, 2137, and 2340.

Try: On 1 October, start using the cost accounts in the attachment and stop using cost accounts 1060, 2137, and 2340.

Place ideas deliberately. Start and finish a sentence any way you like, but keep in mind that ideas gain emphasis when they appear at either end. To mute an idea, put it in the middle.

Maintenance time may have to increase if more structural problems develop. (mutes increased time)

If more structural problems develop, maintenance time may have to increase. (stresses increased time)

For: I would like to congratulate you on your selection as our Employee of the Month for June.

Try: Congratulations on your selection as our June Employee of the Month.

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Try some mini-sentences. An occasional sentence of six words or less slows down readers and emphasizes ideas. The principle is illustrated in this next example from a general's memo to his staff.

> I can get more information from the staff if each of you gives me less. Here's why. In a week, about 110 staff actions show up in my in-box. I could handle these in a week if all I did was work the in-box. Yet about 70% of my time in the headquarters goes not to the in-box but to briefings. I could handle that dilemma, too—by listening to briefings and thinking about staff papers at the same time. I don't.

Look for opportunities in your own writing to use mini-sentences. They'll give it variety.

For: I apologize for not answering your letter sooner, but an extended TDY kept me away from my desk for three weeks.

Try: I should have answered your letter sooner. I apologize. An extended TDY kept me away from my desk for three weeks.

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SPOKEN WRITING

Make your writing as formal or informal as the situation requires, but do so with language you might use in speaking. This isn't a call to copy every quirk of speech down to grunts and ramblings. And, granted, some people speak no better than they write. Still, because readers "hear" writing, the most readable writing sounds like people talking to people.

To make your writing more like speaking, begin by imagining your reader is sitting across from you. Then write with personal pronouns, everyday words, contractions, and short sentences. Together with questions, good tone, and concrete language, these techniques are the best of speaking.

Use Personal Pronouns

Though you needn't go out of your way to use personal pronouns, you mustn't go out of your way to avoid them. Avoiding natural references to people is false modesty. Whether you're a senior official or a subordinate, follow these principles:

1. Use we, us, our when speaking for your organization.
2. Use I, me, my when speaking for yourself.
3. Use you, stated or implied, to refer to the reader.

Multiplied across an entire letter, roundabout sentences like the next examples do severe damage. We would be laughed out of the room if we talked that way. Ordinary English is shorter, clearer, and just as official:

Not: Conceivably, funding constraints for this year will exceed in severity the financial scarcities that have been anticipated.

But: We may have less money this year than we anticipated.

Not: The Naval Facilities Engineering Command, by reference (a), forwarded its draft master plan for the Washington Navy Yard to the Naval Supply Systems Command for review and comment. The following comments apply.

But: In response to reference (a), here are our comments on your draft master plan for the Washington Navy Yard.

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Not: It is necessary that the material be received in this office by June 10.

But: We need the material by June 10.

Or: The material must reach us by June 10.

It is and this command complicate the next example. They force readers to put back the pronouns the writer took out. To make matters worse, the first it is refers to the reader, while the second refers to the sender.

Not: If it is desired that Marines be allowed to compete for positions on the pistol team, this command would be happy to establish and manage team tryouts. It is recommended that tryouts be conducted soon to ensure. . . .

But: If you allow Marines to compete for positions on the pistol team, we would be happy to establish and manage the tryouts. We recommend that tryouts start soon to ensure. . . .

Military writers can profit from an axiom of business writing known as the "you" attitude. It's a matter of showing greater concern for the reader than the writer by using you more than I or we. Better to say "the service you receive" than "the service we provide." Keep this distinction in mind, and when you have a choice, show that you see things from your reader's perspective by putting the emphasis on "you."

Can you overuse personal pronouns? In a few instances, yes. For example, you can use so many pronouns that readers lose sight of what the pronouns refer to. Besides, some subjects don't lend themselves to pronouns; the description of a plane's structure isn't likely to include people. Also, criticism hurts fewer feelings if delivered impersonally. "Nothing has been done" avoids the direct attack of "You have done nothing." Finally, if we or I opens more than two sentences in a row, the writing becomes monotonous and may suggest self-centeredness. Still, military writers have a long way to go before overuse of pronouns is a problem. Most of us will benefit from using more natural references to people.

Talk to One Reader When Writing to Many

When you're writing to many people but none of them in particular, create in your mind a typical reader. Talk to that reader by using you and your, stated or implied. Only one person reads your writing at any one time, so the most readable writing speaks directly to one reader.

Not: All addressees are requested to provide inputs of desired course content.

But: Please send us your recommendations for course content.

Not: It is requested that all employees planning to take leave in December fill in the enclosed schedule.

But: If you plan to take leave in December, fill in the enclosed schedule.

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When you write directives, look for opportunities to talk directly to a user. Procedures, checklists, or other how-to instructions lend themselves to this cookbook approach. Imagine someone has walked up to you and asked what to do. The following example is from an instruction that repeated the duty officer dozens of times:

Not: The duty officer will verify that security responsibilities have been completed by putting his/her initials on the checklist.

But: When you complete the inspection, initial the checklist.

Rely on Everyday Words

The complexity of military work and the need for precision require some big words. But don't use big words when little ones will do. People who speak with small words often let needlessly fancy ones burden their writing. On paper help swells to assistance, pay to remuneration, and visit to visitation. The list goes on, and so does the damage from word inflation.

Do you remember the dude in those old Western movies who overdressed to impress the folks at the ranch? Overdressed writing fails just as foolishly. Here are some commonly overdressed words.

Not	But
commence	start
facilitate	help
optimum	best
promulgate	issue
utilize	use

Prefer short, spoken transitions over long, bookish ones. Save long transitions for variety. By preferring short ones, you help set an ordinary tone for the rest of what you say. (And, yes, you can start sentences with conjunctions.)

Not	But
consequently	so
however	but
in addition	also
nevertheless	still

Avoid legalistic lingo. Let a regulation's number or a letter's signature carry the authority instead of trying to put that authority in your language. Write to express, not to impress.

Not	But
aforesaid	the, that
heretofore	until now
herewith is	here is
the undersigned	I

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All writers try to impress readers. but the best do it through language that doesn't call attention to itself. Size of vocabulary is less important than skill in manipulating the words you already know. See Appendix A for a list of simpler words and phrases.

Use Some Contractions

Contractions link pronouns with verbs (we'd, I'll, you're) and make verbs negative (don't, can't, won't). They're appropriate for all but the most formal writing situations. Yet even when your final product will be a formal reprimand, for example, you can use contractions in drafts to help you write naturally.

The point is that if you're comfortable with contractions, your writing is likely to read easily, for you'll be speaking on paper. And because the language is clear, you're more likely to spot holes in your thinking that need to be filled.

If contractions seem out of place, you may need to deflate the rest of what you say. In the next sentence, something has to go, either the opening contraction or the inflated language that follows: "It's incumbent upon all personnel to effect energy savings." Written naturally, the sentence might read, "It's your job to save energy."

Keep Sentences Short

For variety mix long sentences and short ones, but average under twenty words. Though short sentences won't guarantee clarity, they're usually less confusing than long ones. You needn't count every word. Try the eye test: average under two typed lines. Or try the ear test: read your writing aloud and break up most of the sentences that don't end in one breath. In the next example, we first break the marathon sentence into manageable units and then make the writing sound like speaking.

Not: It is requested that attendees be divided between the two briefing dates with the understanding that any necessary final adjustments will be made by DAA to facilitate equitable distribution. (29 words)

Uh: It is requested that attendees be divided between the two briefing dates. Any necessary final adjustments will be made by DAA to facilitate equitable distribution. (12, 13 words)

But: Send half your people on one day and half on the other. DAA will make final adjustments. (12, 5 words)

Ask More Questions

A request gains emphasis when it ends with a question mark. Do you hear how spoken a question is? Look for opportunities to reach out to your reader:

Not: Request this headquarters be notified as to whether the conference has been rescheduled.

But: Has the conference been rescheduled?

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Not: In an effort to improve the cost of office copier operation, it is requested your firm complete the attached form relating to office copiers which you would propose to rent/lease.

But: Would you let us know on the accompanying form what you charge to rent and lease your copiers?

Listen to Your Tone

Speakers have gesture, voice, and movement to help them communicate. Writers have only words on paper. Recognize your disadvantage as a writer and remember to pay special attention to tone.

Tone—a writer's attitude toward the subject or readers—causes relatively few problems in routine writing. The more sensitive the reader or issue, however, the more careful we must be to promote good will. Tactlessness in writing suggests clumsiness in general. When feelings are involved, one misused word can make an enemy.

Imagine you are a reservist who has asked to stay on active duty even though you have a serious illness. How does the following answer strike you?

> Because you have failed to pass the prescribed physical examination, you will be removed from active duty.

Failed? Removed? These words hint at crime and punishment. To avoid such tactlessness, the tone should be positive.

Negative	**Positive**
Opportunity is limited.	Competition is keen.
Stop writing badly.	Start writing well.
Don't use the small hoist.	Use the big hoist.
The cup is half empty.	The cup is half full.

The positive approach removes some of the sting from the reservist's answer. Here's a possibility:

> Given the results of your physical examination, we must transfer you to the Retired Reserve.

The structure of the letter was better than the wording of the "failed" sentence. The letter opened by acknowledging the favorable endorsements that accompanied the request to stay on active duty, and it closed by thanking the reservist for his years of service. This tactful arrangement helped to soften the bad news.

Now imagine you've asked for more time to complete a correspondence course. Here's the last sentence of the letter that turns you down:

> If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to write.

Beware of rubber-stamp endings such as the one you just read. They don't improve good letters or save bad ones. To the reader whose request has been denied, further assistance

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promises further disappointment. The closing sentence should be dropped entirely or tied to the rest of the letter with positive language:

> This setback aside, we hope you will take advantage of other correspondence courses available to you.

In all fairness to the writer, the letter did explain the denial in enough detail to avoid any hint of a brush-off. Most no answers need some explanation. Yes answers need little explanation because readers get what they want.

Be Concrete

Without generalizations and abstractions, lots of them, we would drown in detail. We sum up vast amounts of experience when we speak of dedication, programs, hardware, and lines of authority. But such abstract language isn't likely to evoke in a reader's mind the same experiences it evokes in a writer's. Lazy writing overuses such vague terms. Often it weakens them further by substituting adjectives for examples: immense dedication, enhanced programs, viable hardware, and responsive lines of authority.

If you write, "The solution to low morale and poor discipline is good leadership," your readers may feel warm all over. But until you point out some specific behavior meant by low morale, poor discipline, and good leadership, neither you nor your readers can tackle the problem. Similarly, don't use a general word if the context allows for a specific one. Be as definite as the situation permits.

For	Try
aircraft	plane
plane	F-16
improved costs	lower costs
enhanced method	faster method? cheaper method?

Vague, high-sounding language also weakens job descriptions. Someone is said to "assist and advise in the organization management aspects of manpower management." Another "serves as a system proponent to transition from current capabilities to architectural projections." But what do these people really do? After all, a person who "serves as a direct interface with interstate commerce" may be only a highway flag holder.

Performance evaluations suffer when writers make extravagant, unsupported claims. Someone actually wrote this next example, and someone else has it ticking in his files.

> Engaged in an assignment of a highly complex and technical nature, Sgt Anderson has molded on-the-job experience, diligence, and perseverance to a point where his seniors and supervisors can inevitably afford credence to his work and the conclusions he derives therefrom.

An effective evaluation shows what a person did and how well he or she did it. It's concrete enough to inspire confidence in the writer's judgment about the ratee's performance and potential.

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CONCISE WRITING

Concise writing includes only those ideas that readers need, and it gives those ideas no more words than they deserve. Careful audience analysis and a willingness to be hard on yourself are essential for conciseness. Have you included too much background? Do excessive details bury your point? Are you keeping an irrelevant idea just because it sounds ever so fine?

You can say too little, of course, and not persuade your readers that a certain problem is serious or that your solution is worthwhile. Sometimes simple courtesy requires bulk; a one-sentence letter of praise is just too abrupt. But the point remains: the best writing, like the best machinery, has no unnecessary parts.

Don't be overly concerned about conciseness when you are getting your ideas on paper. If you try to create and edit at the same time, you may bog down in detail and lose sight of your point. When you polish your writing, though, look for wordiness everywhere. Question the need for every paragraph, every sentence, every word. The longer you take to say things, the weaker you come across and the more you risk blurring important ideas. In the war against wordiness, the best weapon is a writer's ruthlessness. Now here are some common forms of wordiness that are easy to spot and avoid:

Avoid "it is" and "there is"

No two words hurt military writing more than it is. They stretch sentences, delay meaning hide responsibility, and encourage passive verbs. Unless it refers to something mentioned earlier, avoid it is. Spare only spoken expressions such as "it is time to . . ." or "it is hard to . . ." and an occasional pointing expression such as "it is your job to . . ." (not someone else's).

Not	But
it is requested	we request, please
it is my intention	I intend
it is necessary that you	you need to, you must
it is apparent that	clearly
it is the recommendation of this office that	we recommend

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Not: It is mandatory that all personnel receive flu vaccinations.

But: All personnel must receive flu vaccinations.

Not: It is requested that all badges be surrendered upon departure of your group from the restricted area.

But: Return all badges when your group leaves the restricted area.

Like it is constructions, forms of there is make sentences start slowly. Don't write these delayers without first trying to avoid them.

Not: There will be a meeting of the Human Relations Council at 1000 on 26 July in the main conference room.

But: The Human Relations Council will meet at 1000 on 26 July in the main conference room.

Not: There are two alternatives offered in the report.

But: The report offers two alternatives.

Prune Wordy Expressions

Wordy expressions don't give writing impressive bulk; they clutter it by getting in the way of the words that carry the meaning. In order to and in accordance with, for example, are minor ideas that don't deserve three words. Here are some repeat offenders.

Not	But
for the purpose of	for, to
in accordance with	by, following, under
in order to	to
in the event that	if
in the near future	shortly, soon
be advised	-
in the process of	-
is responsible for	-
the provisions of	-
the use of	-

Wordy expressions dilute the next examples. Extended across a letter or report, the savings from cutting such bloated language are considerable.

Not: In accordance with the new regulation, you may pay the claim with a check in the amount of $300.

But: Under the new regulation, you may pay the claim with a check for $300.

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Not: In the event that this offer is satisfactory, be advised your written acceptance must reach us before May 11.

But: If this offer is satisfactory, your written acceptance must reach us before May 11.

Not: We are in the process of revising our form letters in order to make them more readable.

But: We are revising our form letters to make them more readable.

Free Smothered Verbs

Make your verbs do more work. The most important word in a sentence is the verb, the action word, the only word that can do something. Weak writing relies on general verbs, which take extra words to complete their meaning. When you write a general verb such as make or give, check to see whether you can turn a nearby word into a specific verb.

Not: This directive is applicable to everyone who makes use of the system.

But: This directive applies to everyone who uses the system.

Not: The committee held a meeting to give consideration to the proposal.

But: The committee met to consider the proposal.

Not: We will conduct an investigation into the incident before making a decision.

But: We will investigate the incident before deciding.

To be deserves special attention. It's the most common verb in English and the weakest. Though we need it often, often we don't. Cut down on your use of to be in any of its forms: am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been.

Shun "the -ion of" and "the -ment of"

Words ending in -ion and -ment are verbs turned into nouns. Whenever the context permits, change these nouns to verb forms. By favoring verb forms, your sentences will be shorter and livelier.

Not: Use that format for the preparation of your command history.

But: Use that format to prepare your command history.

Not: The settlement of travel claims involves the examination of orders.

But: Settling travel claims involves examining orders.

Or: To settle travel claims, we examine orders.

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Cut Doublings

As the writer, you may see some differences between advise and assist, interest and concern, or thanks and gratitude. But your readers won't. Repeating a general idea can't make it any more precise. Simple subtraction will overcome doublings such as these:

Not: We must comply with the standards and criteria for controlling and reducing environmental pollution.

But: We must comply with the standards for reducing environmental pollution.

Not: The Department of Defense has developed plans for an orderly and integrated system of executive and management advancement.

But: The Department of Defense has developed plans for a system of executive advancement.

Prevent Hut-2-3-4 Phrases

Though you should cut needless words, sometimes you can go too far. Avoid hut-2-3-4 phrases—long clots of nouns and modifiers. Readers can't tell how the parts fit together or where they all will end. We must live with some established hut-2-3-4 phrases such as Air Traffic Control Radar Beacon System, but you can keep them out of whatever you originate by adding some words or rewriting entirely.

Not: the Board of Inspection and Survey service acceptance trials requirements

But: requirements by the Board of Inspection and Survey for service acceptance trials

Not: training needs planning summary survey

But: survey of training needs for the planning summary

Avoid Excessive Abbreviating

Excessive abbreviating is another common form of false economy. Use abbreviations no more than you must with insiders, and avoid them entirely with outsiders. Spell out an unfamiliar abbreviation the first time it appears, like this:

Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC)

If an abbreviation would appear only twice or infrequently, spell out the term every time and avoid the abbreviation entirely. Put clarity before economy.

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ACTIVE WRITING

Passive writing is wordy, roundabout, and sometimes downright confusing. To avoid this infectious disease, learn how to spot passive verbs and make them active. Most of your sentences should use a who-does-what order. By leading with the doer, you automatically will avoid a passive verb.

Doctor: When did you first notice your use of verbs in the passive voice?

Patient: The utilization was first noticed by me shortly after the military was entered. A civilian agency has been joined by my brother. The same condition has been remarked on by him.

Doctor: Did you know that most of the verbs we speak with are active? So are most of the verbs in newspapers and magazines, the kinds of writing we like to read.

Patient: Well, it is believed by me that many verbs are made passive by military writers. In the letters and directives that have been prepared by this speaker, passive verbs have been utilized extensively. Are problems caused?

If you heard the unnatural sound of the patient's passives and know how to lead with doers, you needn't read on. But the following technical discussion may be helpful.

Learn the Symptoms of Passive Voice

A verb in the passive voice uses any form of to be plus the past participle of a main verb:

am is are was were be being been

PLUS

a main verb usually ending in -en or -ed

Unlike sentences with active verbs, sentences with passives don't need to show who or what has done the verb's action. If a doer appears at all, it follows the verb. But most passives in military writing just imply the doer, a severe problem when the doer isn't clear from the context. Passive verbs look like the following underlined words:

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Ex: As a result of what has been learned, it is desired that additional equipment testing be made.

(Be made is passive. The past particple of to make is irregular.)

Ex: Two units of blood were ordered for an emergency patient whose hematocrit had fallen below 20 percent.

(Had fallen is active. Had isn't a form of to be. Besides, what did the falling? Hematocrit, which appears before the verb.)

Know the Three Cures

Put a doer before the verb:

Not: The part must have been broken by the handlers.

But: The handlers must have broken the part.

Not: The requests must be approved. (By whom?)

But: The supervisor must approve the requests.

Not: Complete uniforms must be worn by all personnel.

But: All personnel must wear complete uniforms.

Or: Wear complete uniforms.

Drop part of the verb:

Not: The results are listed in the attachment.

But: The results are in the attachment.

Not: Then she was transferred to Maxwell AFB.

But: Then she transferred to Maxwell AFB.

Change the verb:

Not: Letter formats are shown in the correspondence manual.

But: Letter formats appear in the correspondence manual.

Not: The replacement has not been received yet.

But: The replacement has not arrived yet.

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Write Passively only for Good Reason

Now and then, write passively if you have good reason to avoid saying who or what has done the verb's action. This situation may occur if the doer is unknown, unimportant, obvious, or better left unsaid:

> Presidents are elected every four years. (doer obvious)
>
> The part was shipped on 1 June. (doer unimportant, perhaps)
>
> Christmas has been scheduled as a work day. (doer better left unsaid)

Now and then, you may want to write a passive sentence that names the doer. The situation may occur when you need a transition from one topic to another. The following sentence would shift a discussion from individual habit to group inertia:

> Writing improvement is doubly difficult when individual habit is reinforced by group inertia.

Now and then, a passive sentence that names the doer is appropriate if the rest of the paragraph is about the receiver of the verb's action. The following sentence might work in a paragraph about a general.

> Then the general was hit by a falling limb.

Finally, for variety or stateliness, you may want the slow procession of a passive sentence such as this one on a monument at the Air Force Academy:

> Man's flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge.

When in doubt, write actively, even though the doer may seem obvious or whatever. You will write livelier sentences (not, livelier sentences will be written by you).

Practice on These Examples

The following paragraph comes from a letter that proposes to expand a Scheduled Airline Ticket Office (SATO). Find the passives and try to make them active. Then check yourself against the revision.

> During that time period, a total of $644,000 was expended in the issuance of government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel. It is estimated by SATO that an additional $10,000 per month would be generated through casual travel. A summary of the GTR revenue by month is provided in attachment 1.

Here is a sentence-by-sentence revision of the passive paragraph:

> During that time period, a total of $644,000 <u>was expended</u> in the issuance of government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel.

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We can cut 19 percent from the passive sentence above just by shortening during that time period to during that time and by omitting a total of. No writer has any excuse for not performing such simple subtraction. To avoid the passive was expended, we don't have to know who or what did the spending. The core idea is this: "During that time, government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel totaled $644,000." Now the verb carries more of the meaning, $644,000 appears in a stronger place, and the sentence is slimmer by 43 percent.

> It is estimated by SATO that an additional $10,000 per month would be generated through casual travel.

This sentence is easy to improve because doers follow both passive verbs. "SATO estimates that casual travel would generate an additional $10,000 per month." Though active now, the sentence still needs work. We can shorten generate to add, an additional to another, and per to a. For clarity, casual travel can become off-duty travel. These small improvements add up: "SATO estimates that off-duty travel would add $10,000 a month."

> A summary of the GTR revenue by month is provided in attachment 1.

Though the sentence would be shorter if we simply dropped provided, the weak is would remain. Better to reshape the sentence: "Attachment 1 provides a summary of the GTR revenue by month." But provides a summary is a smothered verb for summarizes. So the best improvement is this: "Attachment 1 summarizes the GTR revenue by month." Here is the passive original again, followed by the active version:

Passive: During that time period, a total of $644,000 was expended in the issuance of government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel. It is estimated by SATO that an additional $10,000 per month would be generated through casual travel. A summary of the GTR revenue by month is provided in attachment 1. (50 words)

Active: During that time, government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel totaled $644,000. SATO estimates that off-duty travel would add $10,000 a month. Attachment 1 summarizes the GTR revenue by month. (31 words)

The following letter, from an inspector general, suffers from epidemic passives and other problems. On a separate sheet of paper, rewrite the letter to make it organized, spoken, concise, and active.

> Attachment 1 is forwarded for review and comment as to concurrence or noncurrence with the recommendations of the subject inspection. Only those recommendations requiring action are forwarded. Comments are requested by 7 June in order that approval and implementing can be taken. Recommendations will stand as written if concurrence is not provided by the above date.
>
> Status reports or comments concerning actions completed or in progress are not to be submitted at this time. Guidance on status reporting will be provided at a later date. (85 words)

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Here's our version (you may have come up with a better one).

> Please concur or nonconcur with the inspection recommendations in attachment 1. To consider changes to these recommendations, we must have your comments by 7 June.
>
> Don't send status reports about actions completed or in progress. Guidance on these will reach you later. (40 words)

The second sentence of the original is unnecessary. Elsewhere in the original the writing is swollen: provided and submitted for sent, in order that for so, and at a later date for later. But the worst damage comes from the seven untouched-by-human-hands passives. They force readers to pause and figure out just who is supposed to do what. The revision avoids the passives by talking directly to a typical reader. Note the personal pronouns, contractions, and please.

Please, the first word of the active version, is a convention of modern writing (and speaking) that helps avoid many roundabout constructions. "Please send us two blivets" is far more efficient than "it is requested that two blivets be sent to this command." Real men—and women—do say "please."

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SIMPLER WORDS AND PHRASES

Instead of	*Try*
accompany	go with
accomplish	carry out, do
accomplish (a form)	fill out
accordingly	so
accrue	add, gain
accurate	correct, exact, right
achieve	do, make
actual	real
additional	added, more, other
adjacent to	next to
advantageous	helpful
advise	recommend, tell
affix	put, stick
afford an opportunity	allow, let
aircraft	plane
anticipate	expect
a number of	some
apparent	clear, plain
appear	seem
appreciable	many
appropriate	proper, right
approximately	about
as a means of	to
ascertain	find out, learn
as prescribed by	under
assist, assistance	aid, help
attached herewith is	here's
attempt	try
at the present time	now
benefit	help
by means of	by, with
cannot	can't
capability	ability
category	class, group
close proximity	near
combined	joint
comply	follow
component	part
comprise	form, include, make up
concerning	about, on
conclude	close, end
concur	agree
confront	face, meet
consequently	so
consolidate	combine, join, merge
constitutes	is, forms, makes up
construct	build
contains	has
continue	keep on
contribute	give
cooperate	help
currently	(leave out)
deem	think
delete	cut, drop
demonstrate	prove, show
depart	leave
designate	appoint, choose, name, pick
desire	wish
determine	decide, figure, find
develop	grow, make, take place
disclose	show
discontinue	drop, stop
disseminate	issue, send out

Instead of	*Try*
do not	don't
due to the fact that	due to, since
echelons	levels
effect	make
elect	choose, pick
eliminate	cut, drop, end
employ	use
encounter	meet
encourage	urge
endeavor	try
ensure	make sure
enumerate	count
equitable	fair
equivalent	equal
establish	set up, prove, show
evaluate	check, rate, test
evidenced	showed
evident	clear
examine	check, look at
exhibit	show
expedite	hurry, rush, speed up
expeditious	fast, quick
expend	pay out, spend
expense	cost, fee, price
explain	show, tell
facilitate	ease, help
factor	reason, cause
failed to	didn't
fatuous numbskull	jerk
feasible	can be done, workable
females	women
final	last
finalize	complete, finish
for example	such as
forfeit	give up, lose
for the purpose of	for, to
forward	send
function	act, role, work
fundamental	basic
furnish	give, send
has the capability	can
herein	here
however	but
identical	same
identify	find, name, show
immediately	at once
impacted	affected, changed, hit
implement	carry out, do, follow
in accordance with	by, under
in addition	also, besides, too
in an effort to	to
inasmuch as	since
inception	start
in conjunction with	with
incorporate	blend, join, merge
incumbent upon	must
indicate	show, write down
indication	sign
initial	first
initiate	start
in lieu of	instead of
in order that	for, so

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Instead of	*Try*
in order to	to
in regard to	about, concerning, on
interpose no objection	don't object
in the amount of	for
in the course of	during, in
in the event that	if
in the near future	soon
in view of	since
in view of the above	so
it is	(leave out)
it is essential	must
it is recommended	I, we recommend
it is requested	please
justify	prove
legislation	law
limited number	few
limitations	limits
locate	find
location	place, scene, site
magnitude	size
maintain	keep, support
majority	greatest, longest, most
minimize	decrease, lessen, reduce
modify	change
monitor	check, watch
nebulous	vague
necessitate	cause, need
notify	let know, tell
numerous	many, most
objective	aim, goal
obligate	bind, compel
observe	see
obtain	get
operate	run, work
operational	working
optimum	best, greatest, most
option	choice, way
participate	take part
perform	do
permit	let
personnel	people, staff
pertaining to	about, of, on
place	put
portion	part
position	place
possess	have, own
preclude	prevent
prepared	ready
previous	earlier, past
previously	before
prioritize	rank
prior to	before
probability	chance
procedures	rules, ways
proceed	do, go on, try
proficiency	skill
programmed	planned
promulgate	announce, issue
provide	give, say, supply
provided that	if
provides guidance for	guides
(the) provisions of	(leave out)
purchase	buy

Instead of	*Try*
reason for	why
recapitulate	sum up
reduce	cut
reflect	say, show
regarding	about, of, on
relating to	about, on
relocation	move
remain	stay
remainder	rest
remuneration	pay, payment
render	give, make
request	ask
require	must, need
requirement	need
retain	keep
return	go back
review	check, go over
selection	choice
similar	like
solicit	ask for
state	say
subject	the, this, your
submit	give, send
subsequent	later, next
subsequently	after, later, then
substantial	large, real, strong
sufficient	enough
take appropriate measures	please
terminate	end, stop
that	(leave out)
therefore	so
there are	(leave out)
there is	(leave out)
thereof	its, their
this office	us, we
time period	(either one)
transmit	send
transpire	happen, occur
-type	(leave out)
until such time as	until
(the) use of	(leave out)
utilize, utilization	use
validate	confirm
value	cost, worth
verbatim	word for word, exact
via	in, on, through
viable	workable
warrant	call for, permit
whenever	when
whereas	since
with reference to	about
with the exception of	except for
witnessed	saw
/	and, or

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Appendix B

COMPLETED STAFF WORK

Here are two testimonials on how to write for a busy boss. The first comes from an anonymous university administrator. The second is part of a memo by Army General Donn A. Starry to his staff. Together the statements argue for thorough legwork and compact paperwork.

> Completed staff work consists of studying a problem and presenting its solution in such a way that the President need only indicate his approval or disapproval of the completed action. The words completed action are emphasized because the more difficult a problem is, the more the tendency is to present the problem to the President in piecemeal fashion. It is a staff member's duty to work out details, no matter how perplexing they may be.
>
> It is so easy to ask the President what to do, and it appears so easy for him to answer. Resist that impulse. You will succumb to it only if you do not know your job. It is your job to tell the President what he ought to do, not to ask him what you ought to do. HE NEEDS ANSWERS, NOT QUESTIONS. Your job is to study, write, restudy and rewrite until you have evolved a single proposed action--the best one of all you have considered. The President merely approves or disapproves. Alternate courses of action are desirable in many cases and should be presented. But you should say which alternative you think is best.
>
> Do you worry the President with long explanations and memoranda? Writing a memorandum to the President does not constitute completed staff work, but writing a memorandum for the President to send to someone else does. Your views should be placed before him in finished form so that he can make them his views simply by signing his name. The statement should be submitted with supporting documents, as appropriate. If you have reached the proper result, the President will usually recognize it at once. If he wants comment or explanation, he will ask for it.
>
> The theory of completed staff work does not preclude the rough draft, but the rough draft must not be a half-baked idea. It must be complete in every respect, except that it lacks the required number of copies and may not be neat. Do not use a rough draft as an excuse for shifting to the President your burden of formulating the action.
>
> The completed staff work theory may result in more work for the staff member, but it results in more freedom for the President. This is as it should be. Further, it accomplishes two things:
>
> > The President is protected from half-baked ideas, voluminous memoranda and immature oral presentations.
> >
> > The staff member who has an idea to sell can find a market more readily.

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When you have finished your staff work, the final test is this: if you were the President, would you sign the paper you have prepared and stake your professional reputation on its being right? If the answer is no, take it back and work it over, because it is not yet completed staff work.

* * *

I can get more information from the staff if each of you gives me less. Here's why. In a week, about 110 staff actions show up in my in-box. I could handle these in a week if all I did was work the in-box. Yet about 70% of my time in the headquarters goes not to the in-box but to briefings. I could handle that dilemma, too--by listening to briefings and thinking about staff papers at the same time. I don't. Most of the information I need is in the field. Much of my time must go there. In February, for example, I was here six days.

Within those six days, add 15-20 office calls, a dozen or so visitors, seven social engagements, two or three ceremonies, and 32 telephone calls. These are the realities.

To work the problems of the central battle within the restrictions of the realities, I need less information. But every piece of the less has to be pure. Every piece must go through that old filter of need to know, good to know, nice to know. I need the need part, not the rest. You need to synthesize, condense, strip out, boil down, distill, abstract--like a good newspaper editor.

Here's your challenge: reduce six months of work to a 10-page package, or a package to a page, or a page to a paragraph, or a paragraph to a sentence, or a sentence to a few words, or a few words to a model or diagram. I need concepts, bottom lines, central themes, summaries, abstracts. Any action officer who can condense accurately is worth ten who run out poopsheets by the pound. My measure of completed staff work is less paper, not more.

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SECRETARY'S WRITING STYLE

Clarity and brevity are key factors when preparing a letter for the Secretary or Deputy Secretary. The Secretary wants short sentences and short words, with emphasis on plain English. Use no more words than effective expression requires.

- Answer questions specifically.
- The response should be no more than one page, where possible. When answering a series of questions, prepare a brief cover letter and attach question and answer page (or pages).
- If the response is negative, be polite; not abrupt.
- Avoid wordiness. Keep sentences lean and short.
- Use the active rather than the passive voice.
- Use no unnecessary adjectives or adverbs. Write with nouns and verbs to strengthen letter.
- Do not use nouns or adjectives as verbs, such as:
  to impact
  to interface
  it obsoletes
- Use the precise word or phrase.

  datum (singular) - data (plural)
  criterion (singular) - criteria (plural)
  subsequent means after, not before
  different from, not different than
  insure means to guarantee against financial loss.
  ensure means to make sure or certain. (Although insure and ensure share the same meaning, this usage is preferred.)
  affect means to influence; to act upon; to alter; to assume; to adopt
  think is mental; feel is physical or emotional (think thoughts; feel feelings)
- Please stop using affected or imprecise words. Some examples:

  alternatives (use choices)
  delighted (use pleased or happy)
  dialogue
  effectuated
  enhance
  facilitate
  glad (use pleased or happy)
  hereinafter
  hopefully (use I hope)
  image
  input
  ongoing (prefer continuing)
  orient
  output
  overview
  parameter (use boundary or limit
  self-initiate
  specificity
  target or targeted
  thrust
  unique
  viable

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- Please stop using ALL "ize" words. Some examples:

  finalize
  maximize
  minimize
  optimize
  prioritize
  utilize (prefer use)
  utilization

- Please stop using the following phrases:

  as you know, as I am sure you know, as you are aware
  at the present time (use at this time)
  bottom line
  contingent upon
  due to (use because)
  I am deeply concerned
  I appreciate your concern (or interest or views)
  I believe, we believe (unless speculating on future action)
  I regret I cannot be more responsive (or encouraging)
  I share your concern (or interest or views)
  I understand (unless speculating on future action)
  I would hope (use I hope)
  in essence, the essence
  in terms of
  it is my intention
  more importantly (use more important)
  mutually beneficial
  needless to say
  point in time
  positive feedback
  prior to (use before)
  subject matter
  thank you for your letter expressing concern (use Thank you for your letter regarding...)
  time frame
  subject matter

- Avoid

  closing the letter too abruptly. (Thank the writer for his or her interest or support.)
  one-sentence paragraphs in body of the letter.
  over-quoting Writer's letter.

- Eliminate gender specific language, whenever possible.

  worker (instead of workman)
  chairperson (instead of chairman)
  reporter or newscaster (instead of newsman)
  officer (instead of policeman)
  astronaut (instead of spaceman)
  mail carrier (instead of postman)
  committeeperson (instead of committeeman)

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- Avoid redundancies, such as

  enclosed herewith
  end result
  future plans
  important essentials
  new initiatives
  personally reviewed
  serious crisis

- Avoid split infinitives (placing an adverb between to and the verb) unless a split infinitive makes the sentence less awkward.

- Do not use addressee's first name in the body of the letter.

- Do not refer to the date of the incoming letter.

- Stop apologizing, such as:

  I regret the delay in responding to you.

- Do not close a letter with the following phrases:

  Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.
  I hope this information is helpful.

- Annual Reports to Congress (transmittal letter)

  Use: I am pleased to submit

- Closing the letter

  Do not use:

  With best wishes,

The following quote from The Elements of Style by Strunk and White reflects the Secretary's style:

"Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell."

Secretary Baldrige says, "In short, halfway between Ernest Hemingway and Zane Grey with no bureaucratese."

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